

# THE SECURITY OF HOPE

## THE CONFRATERNITY OF THE LIVING ROSARY

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**Abstract:** The Living Rosary Association, a renewed form of the rosary confraternity, was principally an association of the peasantry and lower social strata in Hungary. The paper presents and interprets the confraternity practice of a settlement (Kunszentmárton, Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County on the Hungarian Great Plain), through confraternity minutes (1851–1940), the fraternity's religious literature and journal, interviews and comparison with other fraternities. The rosary was principally a form of female devotion. However, up to the 1940s the leaders were men. The high degree of feminisation can be interpreted in the frame of the process of secularisation. In the course of the processes of economic, social and cultural modernisation, the tasks of the private sphere within the family (running the household, raising children) fell to women. Within this frame they also provided for the family's sacral world. Until the 1940s the rosary confraternity preserved its character as a women's mass movement. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century the prayer groups were organised on a family and neighbourhood basis. The confraternity also established its own funeral society, linking the living and the dead in prayer.

Among the reasons for the popularity of the rosary were its democratic nature and the clear religious goals: it provided the faithful with an institutional frame for their charitable activity; it set readily understandable and easily performed tasks for its members; it required the acceptable co-ordination of individual and communal forms of religious practice. The prayer had a flexible spatial and temporal structure, that is, the prayers could be said at any time and anywhere, even during work. This ensured for devotions a required intimacy but at the same time also a communal character.

We have a tendency in research to regard the religious confraternities only as a sociological and cultural phenomenon, forgetting the transcendental aspects they have for members. Besides the few characteristics mentioned so far, membership of the rosary confraternity offered and still offers its members the possibility of salvation through the certainty of faith. This gives the members the security of hope for the future.

**Keywords:** Living Rosary Association, rosary, feminisation, individual and communal religious practice, the security of hope

## THE PROBLEM

The lay religious societies are important forms of the self-organisation of lay believers, they represent significant organisational frames of religious society, having a key function in the everyday realisation of both individual and collective religiosity. In

addition they may also undertake numerous tasks of social adjustment and solidarity: they may also play charitable, social welfare and cultural roles. They are organisations with a complex function. These functions may appear to differing extents in the operation of the individual societies. The rosary confraternity is a typical prayer society. Its aim is to serve individual salvation and the religious goals of the community through prayer and good deeds.

From the viewpoint of the individual, belonging to or joining a religious society and participation in religious movements (perhaps) also required and therefore meant partly or completely rethinking and reformulating the individual's network of contacts. These contacts are understood here to mean the individual's relationship not only with other people but also with God, and the connection with present, future and past. The individual considers the questions: who am I, where do I belong, what is my goal in life?

My paper attempts to examine and interpret this in the everyday life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries of a single religious society, the Confraternity of the Living Rosary in Kunszentmárton.<sup>1</sup> The minutes of the confraternity, kept from the foundation in 1851 to 1940, were used for the investigation. In addition to analysing the historical data I also used interviews I conducted with present-day members.<sup>2</sup>

## HISTORY OF THE LIVING ROSARY

Under the influence of the revolutionary movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Enlightenment, alienation from the Catholic Church, or secularisation, was stronger in France than anywhere else in Europe. In this situation Pauline Maria Jaricot (1799–1862) established the so-called Living Rosary prayer confraternity in Lyon in 1826. Its structure and special characteristic was that 15 persons group together and divide up among themselves the fifteen mysteries of the rosary into three times five (joyful, sorrowful and glorious) mysteries,<sup>3</sup> saying the prayer, one decade<sup>4</sup> throughout the whole month. The rosary confraternity and the device and tool used to count the prayers (in a different form) was known from the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Pope Gregory XVI accorded the Living Rosary society canonical status in 1832, and indulgenced it. The confraternity soon began to flourish, not only in France but also in Germany, Italy, Hungary and elsewhere. In 1877 Pope Pius IX placed it under Dominican direction.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BARNA 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The Kunszentmárton case study is part of a larger research project covering the whole of historical Hungary, aimed at exploring and analysing the historical and ethnological aspects of the operation of the Confraternity of the Living Rosary.

<sup>3</sup> Mysteries: different events of Jesus' life in connection with the life of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>4</sup> Decade: one mystery plus ten times Hail Mary.

<sup>5</sup> KIRSCH 1950: 337–338.

The Living Rosary is not a real confraternity in the canon law sense. It does not have a confraternity book, it does not belong to the (old) rosary confraternities.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, from the viewpoint of canon law it can be regarded merely as a *society*.

It was the aim of the Living Rosary right from the start to win the widest possible public for the regular prayers of the rosary. It had a missionary character. The Dominican order regards the Living Rosary as a kind of preparation for entering the real rosary confraternity.<sup>7</sup> However, in Hungarian folk religiosity it represents the "rosary confraternity". Its first recognised society in Hungary was formed in 1843 in Győr.<sup>8</sup>

## THE KUNSZENTMÁRTON CONFRATERNITY OF THE LIVING ROSARY

People from Kunszentmárton got to know about the living rosary devotions and the confraternity form in 1851 in the place of pilgrimage at Máriaradna (now Radna, Arad County, today Romania) at the Whitsun feast.<sup>9</sup> The singers leading the pilgrimage obtained the approval of the parish priest for the matter, who also gave information from the pulpit about the prayers and the confraternity when the organisation was started.<sup>10</sup> He used the prestige of his position to support the organisation of the new religious confraternity. At the request of the parish priest a register was made of members joining the confraternity: with separate groups for men and women.

The parish priest authorised an order for two white confraternity banners and five confraternity torches. These were used by 15 *Daughters of Mary* at confraternity masses, when prayer cards were exchanged,<sup>11</sup> on feasts of the Virgin Mary, in processions and at major feasts. Later they also purchased a portable statue of Mary. These measures by the parish priest served on one hand to have a role in church patronage accepted and on the other to recognise participation in liturgical service and legitimise the confraternity. They also served the symbolical and real manifestation of the confraternity in time, and through the objects at any given time, as well as at important public religious occasions such as processions and special masses.

<sup>6</sup> KIRSCH 1950: 338.

<sup>7</sup> The "real rosary confraternity" is not a fifteen-member-group in which the members pray one mystery a month, but a group saying 150 Hail Mary a week. There are basically three forms of the rosary devotions and society: 1. the real rosary, has a register of members and roots going back to the Middle Ages, 2. the perpetual rosary is a society whose members undertake a perpetual prayer hour monthly or annually, it has a register of members and originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, 3. members of the living rosary confraternity have to pray a decade of the rosary, one mystery for a month, the rules do not require a register of members, dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> BARNÁ 1998.

<sup>9</sup> For details on the pilgrimages made by people from Kunszentmárton to Máriaradna, see: BARNÁ 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Minute-book of the Kunszentmárton Living Rosary Confraternity 1851–1940, hereafter: Jgyk 4, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Exchange of prayer cards: exchange of small prints, containing the actual mystery which was depicted on the paper.

The leader of the Daughters of Mary was always an older woman.<sup>12</sup> Women occupied this position for many years. Their task was to train the girls and supervise their participation in the liturgy.<sup>13</sup>

Within its own frames the rosary confraternity formed a funeral society in the 1850s which functioned until the 1960s. Its aim was to raise the splendour of funerals and to support surviving family members. They prayed beside deceased confraternity members at their funeral and on the evening before the funeral, and had a mass said for them every year. This was and still is one of the most important tasks of the rosary society. A burial society already operated in the town. However, it was unable to accept everyone as a member and so the demand arose for the establishment of a separate rosary burial confraternity. As a result, a confraternity was formed within the confraternity. The decision to organize it was made in 1856. Since they already had the permission of the rector, in other words the aspiration was legitimized by the church authorities, they decided to have a funeral banner made – a material confraternity symbol – set the maximum number of members, decided on the “living money”, that is, the sum to be paid on entry and the amount of aid to be paid in case of death as well as the sum to be collected to replace this. The funeral banners could be used only for members of the rosary confraternity. The funeral banner could not be used without permission at the funeral of non-members, with the exception of those who were members of another burial society. “The family of the deceased is entitled to use the torches and to obtain torch-bearers.”<sup>14</sup> In short, they created the organization itself, both symbolically and in reality.

In addition, the confraternity’s most important task until the First World War was to organise the annual pilgrimage to Máriaradna at Whitsun.

## FEMINISATION OF THE ORGANISATION

One of the reasons why this confraternity form became so popular could have been that it broke down the big community of religious society into small communities that were transparent for the individual while at the same time the individual was also included into the larger community through these. The basis on which the 15-member groups were organised was always neighbourhood and kinship, already in themselves the basic frames of the lives of individuals.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century this frame had loosened. The men were no longer present and it was mainly women who took part in the life of the confraternity. This was due not only to the growing process of secularisation but also to the greater offer on the “market” of religious fraternities which divided the society of religious laypersons and offered different social patterns for men, women and children, as well as for the prosperous and the poor. And within this range of religious fraternities the rosary was regarded as traditional, and became less and less popular. Nevertheless, before the First World War with

<sup>12</sup> Jgyk 92.

<sup>13</sup> Jgyk 115; BARNA 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Jgyk 59–60.

its more than 1 million members it was the biggest religious society in the Hungarian Kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

There had long existed in the town a *Burial Society* (*Halotti társulat*).<sup>16</sup> In later decades and until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century several other burial societies also functioned in Kunszentmárton. The name of the *Altar Society Association* (*Oltáregylet*) first appears in the Rosary minutes in 1868,<sup>17</sup> and in 1876 the *Heart of Jesus Confraternity* (*Jézus Szíve Társulat*) was formed.<sup>18</sup> A publication issued in Kunszentmárton by the *Saint Joseph Confraternity of Defenders of the Holy Name of God* (*Szent József Társulat*) is known from 1886.<sup>19</sup> However, nothing more is known of the confraternity or its local activity.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially after the First World War growing numbers of confraternities and devotional societies were formed in Kunszentmárton. In 1936 the *Heart of Jesus Confraternity* (*Jézus Szíve Társulat*) operated with 689 members, the *Rosary Confraternity* (*Rózsafüzér Társulat*) with 652, the *Franciscan Third Order* (*Ferences Harmadrend*) with 46, the *Altar Society* (*Oltáregylet*) with 87, the *Association for Dissemination of the Faith* (*Hitterjesztő Egyesület*) with 52, the *Congregation of Mary* (*Máriakongregáció*) with 56, the *Heart League* (*Szívgyárda*) grouping children with 420, and the *Heart of Jesus Children's Society* (*Jézus Szíve Gyermeksége Egyesület*) with 125 members.<sup>20</sup> The *Confraternity of the Perpetual Rosary* (*Örökös Rózsafüzér Társulat*), sometimes confused with the Living Rosary Confraternity, also appeared. There were also other associations, such as the Catholic Circle, the Catholic Women's Association, the Catholic Young Men's and Women's Association,<sup>21</sup> and in 1937 the Kunszentmárton

<sup>15</sup> The devotional movements that arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also developed the forms of association best suited to their purposes. They shaped new prayer societies and religious associations, such as the *Jézus Szíve Társulat* [Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus], the *Isten Szent Neve Védőmezőinek Társulata* [Confraternity of Defenders of the Holy Name of God], *Szeplőtelen Fogantatás Társulata* [Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception], *Élő Lelki rózsafüzér Társulata* [Confraternity of the Living Spiritual Rosary], *Missziós Társulat* [Missionary Society for the support of Christians living under Turkish (Islamic) rule], or the *Szent László Társulat* [Saint Ladislav Confraternity] which aimed to assist Christian Catholic Hungarians living outside the borders of the country at that time, or the *Szent István Társulat* [Saint Stephen Society] set up in 1848 to provide the people with cheap (Catholic) books. These all drew on the examples and experiences of earlier decades, older confraternities and other contemporary (civil) organizations. The frames of their operation were also partly based on these models. The foundations were recognizably Baroque, but in many places in the second half and last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in the time of the Catholic revival – confraternities were also formed, among others, by pilgrims (e.g. Kecskemét, Székesfehérvár, Kunszentmárton). Some examples of these that have come to light have not yet been adequately analysed by researchers.

<sup>16</sup> Jgyk 57, 60–65, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Jgyk 103.

<sup>18</sup> Jgyk 100.

<sup>19</sup> *Isten Szent Neve védőinek Szent József Társulatának imái és énekei, melyek a káromkodás megengeszteléseért mindennap és minden hónap utolsó vasárnapján nagy lelki buzgalommal végzendők az ajtatos hívek által. Összeírta az Isten szent neve védőinek egy méltatlan tagja Nagy Imre. Kunszentmárton 1886-ik évben.* [Prayers and hymns of the Saint Joseph Confraternity of Defenders of the Holy Name of God to be said with great spiritual zeal by devout believers daily and on the last Sunday of every month for atonement of profanity. Compiled by Imre Nagy, an unworthy member of the Defenders of the Holy Name of God. Kunszentmárton, in the year 1886.] (Prayer booklet in the author's possession.)

<sup>20</sup> DÓSA–SZABÓ 1936: 252; see also JÓZSA 1991: 162.

<sup>21</sup> JÓZSA 1991: 162.

Catholic Agricultural Youth Association (*KALOT*) was formed.<sup>22</sup> Following the settlement of the Carmelites in Kunszentmárton, the Carmelite third order and Scapular Society were formed in 1940.<sup>23</sup> The former renewed its activity after 1989. It can be seen that the rosary confraternity lost its exclusively leading and integrating role in the religious life of the town.

The fact that the church leaders of the confraternity were always the parish priests raised the social weight and prestige of the confraternity in the local community. It can be seen from the list of members that several of the town's leaders were members of groups within the confraternity. The heads of the secular public administration, as patrons, considered it their right to authorise the functioning of the confraternity and also to exercise financial supervision over its operation. It can be seen from the list of members that several of the town's leaders were members of groups within the confraternity. In the 1897 list the chief judge and his family are among the members of one group. The authority of the confraternity leadership and members arose, and still arises, not from the civilian occupation and financial, social status, but from the religious life and fervour.

The wives of the most influential and wealthiest landowners were among the donors.<sup>24</sup> Although they retained their role as donors, later at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there is hardly any trace of the town's leading families in the lists of members. The absence of this stratum from the church and religious life was a recurring complaint in the visits made by the subdeacon at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> Summing up the data in the minutes it can be said that at first the leading families of local society figured as members of the rosary confraternity, but later they appeared mainly as patrons and used the confraternity to help in arranging their patronage. The membership of the rosary confraternity increasingly consisted of women drawn from the lower social strata.

The leadership of the rosary confraternity regarded the membership as a relatively homogeneous group; it made no distinction among members by age or occupation, only by gender and place of residence. The distinction between groups of men and women later became meaningless as the number of male members declined. However, the place of residence – Lower Town, Upper Town – remained important because the group leaders held the meetings on this basis.<sup>26</sup>

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries other organisations of similar structure appeared beside the rosary confraternity. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially during the communist/socialist period, the rosary confraternity increasingly lost ground and became a prayer society of middle-aged and elderly women. As a result, its original function as a prayer society was strengthened. Between 1946–1950 all kinds of civil associations, among them religious orders and lay religious societies, were dissolved and prohibited by the communist and socialist authorities.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes in the author's possession.

<sup>23</sup> JÓZSA 1991: 176.

<sup>24</sup> Jgyk 53.

<sup>25</sup> Egri Főegyházmegyei Levéltár [Archives of the Eger Diocese], Minutes of visits by subdeacons 586.

<sup>26</sup> Jgyk 57.

From 1948 confraternity life was characterised by concealment. The confraternity was confined to the ghetto of private life and church life. In 1946–1949 the communist state banned and dissolved the religious confraternities. The ban did not directly affect the rosary confraternity which by then had largely withdrawn into prayer life, but because of the hostile social atmosphere that had been created its membership declined drastically. The confraternity also withdrew from public religious services. Its life was restricted entirely within the frames of individual religious practice but it has survived there right up to the present.

The lists of donors show that it was mainly women who made donations to the collections for various causes. They supported mainly the equipment of the local church (processional banners, processional cross, images of the Stations of the Cross), but they also collected donations for the pilgrimage church at Máriaradna (images of the Stations of the Cross). They also helped the church with voluntary work: they decorated the altars with flowers and cleaned the church. This indicates that within the distribution of roles within the family, religion was the women's field.<sup>27</sup> We know from interviews that by that time many women subscribed to religious papers and journals.<sup>28</sup> But it is not by chance that the handwritten hymn and prayer books that have survived from the second half of the 19th century were all written and owned by men. As singers they were the leaders of the rosary confraternity.<sup>29</sup>

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women began to play an increasingly prominent role in the confraternity, not only as members but also at the leadership level. All this is reflected in a very instructive way in entries made in the minute-books: On December 8, 1867 women are first mentioned by name in the minute-book of the confraternity's meeting, among the donors.<sup>30</sup> For decades the list of members present at the meetings simply noted that many women were also present. In 1874 the number of women present was noted for the first time.<sup>31</sup> And their number grew steadily. But it was not until 1923 that women were first elected to the leadership.<sup>32</sup>

The role of the confraternity women was to decorate the church with flowers, to care for the confraternity picture, statue and banners and to guide the Daughters of Mary, that is, a series of internal confraternity/church tasks. The male leaders of the confraternity led the pilgrimage to Radna and cultivated contacts with the municipal and church authorities, that is, they maintained and operated the system of external relations. In this way the confraternity functioned like families of that time.

The lists of members quite clearly show the rapid feminisation of the Rosary Confraternity in Kunszentmárton. However, this process was not accompanied by an increase in

<sup>27</sup> Jgyk December 9, 1904. At the proposal of Imre Szarvák, vice-president, it was recorded in the minute-book that the confraternity had 14 Stations of the Cross images made for the church at Radna. (Jgyk 185.) The order for a local eternal flame was also recorded here.

<sup>28</sup> Between 1885–1944 the confraternity's official paper was the monthly *Rózsafüzér Királynéja* [Queen of the Rosary].

<sup>29</sup> Manuscript song books in the possession of the author. For an analysis of these books, see: BARNA 2004, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Jgyk 85.

<sup>31</sup> Jgyk 95.

<sup>32</sup> Jgyk 212.

the role of women in the leadership. The public forums were only gradually opened to women. When the confraternity was first launched there were still separate groups for men, later there were mixed groups and then very marked feminisation occurred within the confraternity but right up to the 1940s its leaders were men.<sup>33</sup>

The continuity of generations was interrupted after the communist take-over, during the years of persecution of the churches and religion, and was one of the reasons why today there are now only around 30 active members of the confraternity in Kunszentmárton. They are all women and include one or two teenage girls. The rapid decline in membership began from the 1970s when the cohorts born in the late 19th century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to die out.

## ROLES AND OFFICES

Holding offices in the confraternity meant an increase in social prestige. However, there was a hierarchy of confraternity offices. At the top was the *confraternity president*. The president often also held the post of *singer / choral leader*. This clearly reflects one of the most important roles of the leaders: leading the pilgrimages and the singing in the church before the liturgies. From the time of the establishment of the confraternity right up to 1940 the choral leaders of the Rosary Confraternity were men. The hymn books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century singers were found in 20<sup>th</sup> century legacies, indicating that those who undertook a role as signers also came to preserve and hand down a special cultural heritage. They often filled these posts right up until their death. We have here the picture of a typical conservative, patriarchal society. Most of the groups, known locally as *tens*, were led by women who probably headed the 15-member prayer groups for decades.

### INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICE – RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the rosary increasingly became a confraternity of female piety, but right up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century its members were men. This structural change shows the image of a patriarchal society in which only men could be leaders, indicating that the public forums were open primarily for them. The roles played by women also reinforce their role.<sup>34</sup> Right from the start it was a democratic fraternity: at first the leading strata of society joined and then it gradually came to be the most important frame of religious life for the female members of the lower strata of society.

Although the rosary devotions are of an individual character, the confraternity was able to remain a mass movement right up to the 1940s. This was probably because: 1. its

<sup>33</sup> Jgyk 164–183 of the 111 “tens” (= groups of 15 persons) listed in 1897 only 7 had exclusively male members, 47 were all female and 57 had mixed membership with women in the majority.

<sup>34</sup> MARSHMENT 1994: 131.



operation represented a substantial commitment to church patronage it was in the interest of the church to maintain it, and it provided an institutional frame for the charity of lay believers; 2. it set clear, easily understood and performed tasks; 3. it required of its members an acceptable co-ordination of individual and communal forms of religious practice. Within the frame of individual religious practice this meant saying the 10 Hail Mary prayers of the rosary. The spatial and temporal structure of the devotions was flexible, the prayers could be said at any time and anywhere, even during work, indeed it was even recommended that they be said during work. This ensured an emphasis on intimacy in devotions, an important need of individual religious practice, but at the same time also gave a certain communal character.

People retire for the time of prayer, saying their prayers almost in secret. This individual practice is linked with various forms of communal devotions: the exchange of mysteries on the first Monday of each month, the liturgies for rosary feasts, various forms of paraliturgy. In this way individual and collective devotions alternate and are linked in the rosary prayers. This was and is the case not only in Kunszentmárton but throughout the country.

The Mary feasts generally coincide with one of the rosary mysteries. Thus, for example, the Feast of the Assumption (March 25) preserved the first joyful mystery. The Feast of the Visitation (July 2) is linked with the second joyful mystery, Christmas with the third, the Feast of the Purification (February 2) with the fourth and fifth. On these feasts the members naturally recite the joyful rosary.<sup>35</sup>

The members of the confraternity recite the rosary individually at home, making it an entirely individual ritual. However, they recite it together on the feast days mentioned and on Saturdays and Sundays in church before the mass. They also recite so-called “nines” collectively. This is not a confraternity obligation but it is very popular in many places, especially the Holy Family nine on the days before Christmas, and the Lourdes nine between February 11–19. At communal gatherings different rosary mysteries are recited according to the stages of the church year; the sorrowful mysteries during Lent, the glorious mysteries from after Easter till Advent and the joyful mysteries from Advent till Lent. The daily order of prayers is also set: joyful on Monday, sorrowful on Tuesday and Friday, glorious on Thursday, and on Saturday and Sunday the whole rosary. October evenings are the time of church rosary devotions.

The rosary is prayed at the bier, in the hour before burial for the salvation of the dead. Their prayers are frequently offered for the recovery of sick fellow members, for their families, for young people and for the larger community: for the church, the Pope's intention and also for the country and its leaders. In this way they connect the living with the dead, individual goals with the goals of the community.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> P. FEHÉR 1944: 3.

<sup>36</sup> This is generally characteristic and is confirmed by more than a hundred interviews conducted in different localities of the country.

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

The rosary was and still is principally a form of female devotion. However, up to the 1940s the leaders were men. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only female members were left. The steadily increasing feminisation of religion can generally be observed in Hungary from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and in Central Europe from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the course of the processes of economic, social and cultural modernisation, the tasks of the private sphere within the family (running the household, raising children) fell to women. Within this frame they also provided for the family's sacral world. The confraternity's monthly journal (published 1885–1950) and the literature on the rosary gave the legitimisation of a religiosity that today would be characterised as feminine. Until the 1940s the rosary confraternity preserved its character as a women's mass movement.<sup>37</sup>

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century the devotional life of the rosary confraternity represented a regulated way for women to step out of the frames of the closed concept of the family. Besides stepping out of everyday life, it also offered a frame for joining in the life of the church, a primary forum for openness. The prayer groups were organised on a family and neighbourhood basis. The confraternity also established its own funeral society, linking the living and the dead in prayer.<sup>38</sup> And at the hour of death it promised the members communal solidarity.

Among the reasons for the popularity of the rosary were its democratic nature and the clear religious goals: it provided the faithful with an institutional frame for their charitable activity; it set readily understandable and easily performed tasks for its members; it required the acceptable co-ordination of individual and communal forms of religious practice. The prayer had a flexible spatial and temporal structure. This ensured for devotions a required intimacy but at the same time also a communal character. The rosary confraternity can strengthen and influence memory and ties with the family, relatives, neighbours, the church community and the universal church, between the living and the dead, shaping a special sense of responsibility. The repeated renewal of the organisation and contents (most recently in 2002, Pope John Paul II introduced the rosary of light, which became rapidly popular and began to transform the group-structure of the rosary) strengthen the awareness of modernity and universality (Catholicism).

These functions led to the point where, in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one sixth to one fifth of the population of the town (Kunszentmárton) were members of the rosary confraternity (with female dominance). However, after that it lost its earlier dominance with the rise of other religious associations. Although in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the communist dictatorship it survived in the form of private devotions, it is now only one of the many other religious societies. It is kept alive by elderly women. It was able to withdraw into the intimacy of private life because it came to function exclusively as a prayer society.

<sup>37</sup> Its nature as a mass organisation has now declined, but it is probably still the biggest religious society. However, in the absence of a register of members it is difficult to confirm this with data. Nevertheless the number of members of religious societies is known in numerous settlements and in all cases the rosary confraternity is the largest.

<sup>38</sup> WINSTON-ALLEN 1997.

The Living Rosary Confraternity and its prayer are strictly regulated by rules of the church and the Dominican Order. Nevertheless, many local forms have arisen in communal religious practice. My concept was originally to show that the rosary society is one of the greatest mass prayer networks which offers appropriate frames for women's religiosity. The rosary as prayer and tool and its confraternity form can be regarded as a typical Roman Catholic devotion. So the rosary is a religion-marker. In the structure of membership it is rather democratic: it is open to wealthy and poor, people from higher and lower strata of the society; there is no membership fee; but it offers a suitable way to faith-based charitable activity, especially in parish life.

In our (Hungarian, European) society there is a broad network of different networks taking care of our social, material, mental etc. circumstances. What kind of role do religious networks, this prayer society, the rosary society fill in the life of its members and the community? Why do they need it? What kind of needs keep this prayer society alive? What makes members, today for the most part elderly women, vulnerable? What can cause insecurity?

The answer can be found in the interviews, conducted not only in Kunszentmárton, but in many settlements in Hungary. And the answer is: death and suffering. This latter means not only illness but loneliness as well. With advancing age, the changeable networks to which people belong, become steadily weaker, narrower, smaller. In the end everybody remains alone.

Facing and coping with the final questions: death, life after life, etc. religions built up a vertical spiritual network, instead of or beside the horizontal, social, world-related networks. This spiritual, imaginary network binds the individual, members of the rosary society, the believers, to God, the Virgin Mary, saints, the transcendent world. This may shape a special responsibility: it is more important to feed the soul than the body.

It is an old finding in ethnography that the main task and work of the old people in European peasant societies is to pray. They give spiritual protection to the individual himself or herself, the closer and wider community. And this is also the case in the rosary society. They pray for many purposes: for health, members of the closer family, grandchildren, young people, vocation for priesthood, conversion of sinners, or freedom and so on. It is a spiritual and moral support to the community and the individual. It is an insurance to the individual for the future: somebody is praying for me for ever. It gives the importance of the rosary as prayer society.

We have a tendency in research to regard the religious confraternities only as a sociological and cultural phenomenon, forgetting the transcendental aspects of religious practice. Besides the few characteristics mentioned here, membership of the rosary confraternity offered and still offers its members the possibility of salvation through the certainty of faith. This gives the members security and hope for the future.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> This article sums up a few conclusions from a book on which the author is working. Its title: *Group organisation and individual roles. The Living Rosary Confraternity in Hungary and Central Europe in the 19th–20th centuries.*

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